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ABSTRACT

Prestige-suggestion, the effect that the prestige or reputation of a source has on a receiver, is the subject of this paper. Three research studies which have been done recently by researchers in reading are reported. These studies asked the following questions: If consumers evaluate products by means of reading store advertisements, will they be affected in their evaluations by the prestige of either the brands or the stores? If readers are asked to evaluate the quality of newspaper articles, will they be influenced by the prestige of the newspapers from which the articles came? and If students are asked to evaluate research articles, will they be influenced by the prestige of the university employing the authors of the articles? Results indicate that readers are swayed by the prestige of brand and store, feature articles of high prestige newspapers are evaluated more highly than those of low prestige papers, and there is little influence of university prestige on the perceived quality of research except among graduate students. (JF)

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Prestige Factors Influencing
Evaluative Level Reading

(paper presented at the Twenty-third Annual
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Readers frequently are required to make evaluations while reading. They may read a movie review to decide whether they want to see the movie. They may read a recipe evaluatively in order to determine whether they should try it. Or, they may read articles about political candidates in order to decide whether to vote for them. Evaluative reading is also necessary to make judgments about the quality of the reading materials themselves. Readers may skim evaluatively to decide whether to read an entire book or article.

In making any kind of evaluation, readers may be influenced by factors extraneous to the characteristics of what they are evaluating. Readers' judgments may be affected by their mood that day, by their physical comfort, or by their interest in the subject at hand. Or, perhaps less noticeably, readers may be affected by characteristics of the source of the material to be evaluated. An author's reputation or a movie director's prestige may help (or hinder) the formation of a judgment about the quality of a book or movie.

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This last factor, called prestige-suggestion, is the subject of this paper. Prestige-suggestion may be defined as the effect that the prestige or reputation of a source has on a receiver. The object of much research in rhetoric, psychology and sociology, prestige-suggestion has been investigated recently by researchers in reading. In three research studies, Adler (1977), Nicholai (1977) and Irwin (1976) asked the following questions about the influence of prestige:

1. If consumers evaluate products through reading store advertisements, will they be affected in their evaluations by the prestige of the brands or stores?
2. If readers are asked to evaluate the quality of newspaper articles, will the readers be influenced by the prestige of the newspapers from which the articles came?
3. If students are asked to evaluate research articles, will they be influenced by the prestige of the university employing the authors of the articles?

The purpose of this paper is to report on this research in depth, discuss the results, and provide some concluding remarks about the nature of prestige-suggestion as it affects evaluative reading.

In the first study, Adler (1977) inquired whether store and brand name status in newspaper advertisements affect readers' perceptions of product quality. She constructed two attitude questionnaires, a Status Survey and an Advertising Questionnaire to measure the readers' perceptions. The Status Survey was divided into two parts. In the first part, subjects, who were predominantly female elementary education majors enrolled in an introductory reading methods course, rated the status of each of 31 Midwestern stores which were grouped according to store departments. Then, in the second part, subjects rated 49 brand names which were grouped under eight product categories. The subjects,

skipping unfamiliar stores or brands, indicated their ratings on a semantic differential scale. These judgments are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

<u>Departments</u>	<u>Stores</u>	<u>Products</u>	<u>Brands</u>
Women's	* Saks Fifth Avenue K-Mart	Women's sweaters Women's raincoats	* Calvin Klein Tami London Fog Rain Fair
Men's	Marshall-Field's Robert Hall's	Men's wool shirts Men's suits	Pendleton Collegeman Yves St. Laurent Big Yank
Watches	Condon Jewelers Woolworth's		Bulova Timex
Cologne and Perfumes	Manchester's S. S. Kresge's	Women's cologne Men's cologne	Chanel No. 5 Heaven Scent English Leather Aqua Velva
Stereos	Midwest Hifi Treasure Island	Stereo Receivers	Sansui General Electric

* high prestige listed first

From the obtained data Adler determined high and low prestige store and brand names for use in constructing her second questionnaire. With this instrument, the Advertising Questionnaire, she examined her main question, the effects of store and brand name status on readers' perceptions of product quality. After selecting and altering newspaper advertisements concerning merchandise within the eight product categories, Adler alternated brand and store names accompanying the advertisements so that they fell into the following four categories.

1. high-status store / high-status brand
2. high-status store / low-status brand
3. low-status store / high-status brand
4. low-status store / low-status brand

Each of the eight forms of the questionnaire consisted of eight half-page advertisements, each followed by an eight-item product evaluation survey. Subjects rated the product contained in the advertisement according to style, design, materials, workmanship, durability, cost, and value on the semantic differential scales of the survey.

Adler reported significant differences between high and low status stores in the evaluation of six of the eight products. On the other hand she reported significant differences between high and low status brand names for only four of the eight products. These had the most familiar brand names.

Readers do discriminate between store names, she concluded, and they discriminate between brand names. The status that readers assign to a product does influence readers' perceptions of product quality. Store names exert more influence than do brand names in judging the quality of clothing, but brand names have more influence when cologne and watches are judged. Further, she concluded that when subjects are familiar with the brand names being advertised, they use the brand-name image as a clue in judging product worth. When subjects are unfamiliar with the brand names being advertised, they use store-image as a clue in their judgments.

Thus, in evaluative reading of advertisements, readers are swayed by the prestige associated with the brand and store.

In reading feature articles in major newspapers, are readers

similarly swayed? Nicolai (1977), in the second study of this paper, investigated whether readers were influenced by the prestige-suggestion of the name of a newspaper when they evaluated feature news stories. With procedures similar to Adler's, Nicolai ascertained which American newspapers were regarded as highest and lowest in prestige according to his population, students enrolled in a secondary reading methods course. He developed his main instruments with the identified newspapers:

High Prestige: New York Times
Wall Street Journal

Low Prestige: Atlanta Constitution
Portland Oregonian

Next, Nicolai selected feature articles from Associated Press news files according to their interest, length, and the likelihood of their being printed in any of the newspapers of the study. These carried the following headlines:

"Odds Get Better for Outer Space Visitor"
"Smokey Heads to 'Honey Tree in the Sky'"
"New Orleans Gets Loose for Mardi Gras"
"Writing Skills Seem 'Anti-Intellectual'"

To measure the response of the subjects to the articles, Nicolai first wrote twenty evaluative response Likert scales. These were narrowed to four after evaluation by experts in reading and journalism. The four scales measured the subjects' opinions regarding the organization, clarity, reading ease, and overall quality of an article.

The resulting instrument consisted of the four feature articles attributed to the four newspapers. On the reverse side of each article were the four evaluative scales. Different forms assigned the articles to different newspapers. Subjects were informed in the instructions

that the purpose was to test their ability to evaluate newspaper articles. Before being administered to two sections of the secondary reading methods course, the instrument was field-tested in a graduate research design course.

Nicolai analyzed the results of the experiment by comparing the mean scores of the high-prestige with the mean scores of the low-prestige newspapers.

Results indicated that subjects were susceptible to prestige-suggestion in five of the twenty cases. In ten comparisons no significant differences resulted, although Nicolai pointed out that the mean scores differed in the hypothesized direction. In the remaining five comparisons, articles assigned to the low-prestige newspapers received the significantly higher ratings, the reverse of expectations. Nicolai suggested that since all reverses involved the "Smokey" article, the low prestige newspapers may have been perceived as more knowledgeable about animals and forestry than New York City newspapers.

Thus, Nicolai appears justified in concluding, despite mixed results, that feature articles attributed to high-prestige newspapers are evaluated as higher in quality than those attributed to low-prestige newspapers.

Although results of this study are less striking than in the Adler study, it seems likely that readers are swayed to some extent in their judgments of quality by their perceived idea of the prestige associated with the newspaper in which an article is printed.

The subjects in the Adler study assumed the role of shoppers as they evaluated the quality of brand-name merchandise. In the second study,

the subjects played the part of a critical reader or possibly a newspaper editor as they evaluated the quality of newspaper feature stories. In a third study (Irwin, 1976), the subjects assumed the role of students, researchers, or editors as they evaluated the quality of research articles presented in the form of abstracts.

Irwin's purpose in this study was to determine whether research article abstracts that were attributed to researchers from high-prestige universities would be rated higher in certain qualities than would be the same abstracts attributed to researchers from low-prestige universities.

Again, using procedures similar to those in the other studies, Irwin surveyed two class sections of graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in a secondary reading methods course to determine the prestige level of 48 universities. From the results of the survey, she selected sixteen high- and low-prestige universities as these were perceived by her subjects:

<u>High</u>	<u>Low</u>
University of Michigan	University of South Dakota
Stanford University	Niagara Falls University
University of Wisconsin-Madison	University of Wisconsin-Platteville
Harvard University	Norwich University
Cornell University	Roosevelt University
Northwestern University	Vincennes University
Yale University	Marshall University
University of California-Berkeley	Florida Atlantic University

Next she composed eight abstracts so that two were of high quality, four of medium quality and two of low quality according to a published checklist (Suydam, 1968) for evaluating research and according to the

opinion of a panel of experts. She constructed four forms of the instrument, each form consisting of the eight abstracts containing the five evaluative semantic differential questions. An abstract was attributed to a researcher from a high-prestige university in one form and a researcher from a low-prestige university in another form. The subjects were told they were being tested for their ability to evaluate educational research.

The titles of the abstracts were:

<u>Quality of Abstract</u>	<u>Title</u>
high	Study Skills Versus Rate Training
high	Meaningfulness and Recall in Reading
medium	Underlining Compared to Rereading as a Study Technique
medium	Dialect Interference in Black Junior High Students
medium	Using Subheads for Increased Comprehension
medium	The Effects of Background Music on Reading Achievement
low	Self-Selection and Vocabulary Acquisition
low	Tachistoscope Training with Adult Readers

Irwin's results showed that prestige-suggestion was significant in only one ("Underlining...") of the eight abstracts. Overall, t-test comparisons were significant in only 17 out of the 96 comparisons made across the four forms of the instrument. She found more significant t-tests for graduate students than for undergraduate. Since results from the "Underlining" abstract were consistently significant, she suggested that only under some undefined conditions, might a prestige effect occur. She further suggested that the evaluation score of the significant abstract, one originally rated poor in quality by subjects, was raised by being associated with high-prestige universities.

Of the three studies described, the last obtained the most conflicting results. Although students usually did not seem swayed by university prestige in evaluating research, in one instance they were. Perhaps further research would result in clarifying the circumstances under which students were influenced by university prestige.

According to a study by Harvey and Hays (1972), highly dogmatic subjects were more swayed by expert opinion than were subjects low in dogmatism. Other researchers concluded that the neutrality of the subjects' initial opinions and the vagueness of the evaluative task were related to prestige-suggestibility. Irwin incorporated these ideas into a new research study in which her purpose was to determine whether prestige-suggestibility was related to high scores on a test of dogmatism (Rokeach, 1960). In this study she included only the four medium quality research studies, pairing them with two high and two low-prestige universities. To emphasize the university association, Irwin added to each abstract a footnote identifying the author as having previously obtained his doctorate at a matching high- or low-prestige university.

She administered her modified instrument the following year to 116 undergraduates also enrolled in a secondary reading methods course. To the same subjects she administered Rokeach's dogmatism scale. Again, there were no significant differences, although three-fourths of the time the very slight differences involved favored the high-prestige university. A low and nonsignificant correlation was found between dogmatism and prestige-suggestibility.

A reexamination of the data showed that two of the abstracts were considered by the subjects to be significantly superior to the other two

abstracts, even though these had been rated equal in quality by experts. Perhaps subjects were comparing the quality of the four abstracts instead of evaluating each study independently.

To remove the influence of one abstract on another, Irwin, this time with this author, performed another experiment in which each subject evaluated one abstract only. Each of the 151 subjects judged one of two abstracts assigned to one of four universities. The result this time was even clearer: There was no prestige-effect due to university association. The students in evaluating the quality of the abstract, were not influenced by the prestige of the university from which it came. Furthermore, although subjects saw only a single abstract, they rated one abstract significantly higher in quality than the other across all university affiliations. By reviewing data from the two earlier studies, the researchers found that the same abstract always was rated higher than the other abstract no matter how many abstracts were involved. Expert judges had rated the two about the same, both of medium quality.

Thus it appears that the subjects were evaluating the abstracts as best they could on the merit of the individual abstract and the subjects were not influenced by university prestige associated with the abstract. The subjects in the latter two experiments were university undergraduates. Among those participating in the first Irwin study were graduate students. Since Irwin found more significant t-tests for graduate students than for undergraduates, it might be fruitful to investigate these effects on graduate students in any future research. Since graduate students are more likely to read research articles frequently, they may be more

susceptible to prestige-suggestion because of their greater familiarity with the quality of research from various universities.

In the three main studies included in this paper researchers investigated prestige-suggestion effects upon the evaluation of store merchandise, feature articles, and research abstracts. The researchers predicted that prestige-suggestibility would influence the evaluation that subjects made of these materials. Results indicate that while this is sometimes the case, frequently it is not.

Three reasons can be offered for the discrepancies. First, the subjects in Adler's merchandise evaluation study may have perceived their task as more frivolous or less serious compared to the way subjects in the other two studies viewed their tasks. Subjects in the Adler study acted as consumers while in the latter studies the subjects acted as teachers or students performing professional tasks. Subjects in the Adler study may have been less conscientious about bias entering into their evaluations than subjects in the other two studies.

A second possible reason for discrepancies among the findings of the studies concerns the familiarity of the tasks that subjects were asked to perform. Consumers presumably make judgments about the quality of merchandise all the time. As Adler found, they use the reputation (prestige) of stores and brands to help make decisions about the quality of the products. On the other hand, students are seldom asked to evaluate feature articles or research abstracts. They may not think to use a short-cut, such as prestige or reputation, to help them determine the quality of the materials. If subjects were accustomed to sifting through large quantities of articles or abstracts, they probably would

adopt short-cuts to lighten their task. They might look first at Wall Street Journal articles or University of Michigan abstracts because of the reputation of these institutions.

The third and most likely reason for the discrepancies among the studies concerns the amount of information the researchers gave the subjects to use in making their evaluations. In Adler's study it was extremely difficult for the subjects to evaluate the products on their own merits. Adler provided very little information--a simple line drawing and a brief description for each product. The subjects were left with using the brand name, or if that was unfamiliar, then store name in making their evaluations. Subjects were in no position to evaluate styling, design, materials, workmanship, durability, cost, and overall value. If subjects could have handled the products personally, they would have had much more information to go by, and prestige factors would most likely diminish in importance.

In the other two studies, the researchers provided much more information. Everything the subjects needed for an objective evaluation was in front of them. No guessing and no short-cuts were necessary. Furthermore, the subjects were told they were being tested on their ability to evaluate. To allow themselves to be swayed by outside factors such as author and university would have been less than objective. They apparently chose to evaluate each article on its own merits.

Thus, subjects may be susceptible to prestige-suggestion if one or more of these factors is present.

1. If subjects consider their evaluative task as less serious, they may allow more bias to enter into their decisions.

2. If subjects are very familiar with the evaluative task, they may tend to permit prestige-suggestion because it has served them well as a short-cut in evaluation.
3. If subjects are told they are being tested on their ability to evaluate, they may be less prone to attend to prestige-suggestion.
4. If subjects are given little information on which to base their judgments, they may tend to evaluate on the basis of prestige.

All of the above are interpretations, not findings, that could be made of the research addressed to prestige-suggestion, and each should be verified through further research. Another factor that may affect prestige-suggestibility is degree of dogmatism. As shown by Harvey and Hays (1972) highly dogmatic individuals may be more susceptible to prestige-suggestion. Although this finding was not duplicated in Irwin's second study, it may be that other factors obscured the effect.

The ability to read critically is affected by the reader's awareness of factors that might cause him or her to evaluate unjustly. Susceptibility to prestige-suggestion is one of those factors.

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